Hope

THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

Lo How a Rose E'er Blooming
December 5, 1999

John M. Buchanan

We light this candle as a sign of the coming light of Christ. Advent means coming. We are preparing ourselves for the days when "The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them." (Isaiah 11:6)

God of our salvation, you straighten the winding ways of our hearts and smooth the paths made rough by sin. Keep our conduct blameless, keep our hearts watchful in holiness, and bring to perfection the good you have begun in us. We ask this through him whose coming is certain, whose day draws near; your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever.

The Book of Common Worship
The Second Sunday of Advent

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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LO, HOW A ROSE E'ER BLOOMING

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FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
December 5, 1999

" . . . the desert shall rejoice and blossom . . ." (Isaiah 35:1)

Mark 8: 1-8
Isaiah 40: 1-5, 28-31

Dear God, as we journey through these days of Advent, help us to be alert to signs of your coming into the world. Keep us from that seasonal frenzy that so often turns sour, and turns this season of blessing into a burden. Help us to know something of your advent—in the laughter of children, the singing of choirs, the impulse to love and give. Startle us, O God, again this year, with your truth and your love and your promise of hope, in Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

When I was a college freshman, Dante's *The Divine Comedy* was on the required reading list. In that great work, there is a classic description of hell with its descending rings and vivid torments—ice and fire. Over the gates of hell there was a sign with these words: "Abandon Hope, All Ye Who Enter Here." I remember that not because I was such a good literary scholar, but because most of the freshman class was plowing through Dante at the same time, and it was a memorable evening when over the double doors to the freshman cafeteria, a place of no small suffering, there appeared a wonderfully ornate sign—"Abandon Hope, All Ye Who Enter Here!"

Quite seriously, hopelessness is a particular kind of hell. Hope, as a matter of fact, is at the heart of what it means to live a human life and be a human being. Without hope we are not alive—sometimes quite literally.

Viktor Frankl was one of the saints of the 20th century. A Jewish psychiatrist in Vienna in the 1930's, he was arrested and sent to a concentration camp after the Nazi takeover. Because he was a physician he was kept alive. Frankl did what he could to help his fellow inmates and all the while reflected on and recorded what he saw and experienced and later, after the war, wrote about it in one of the important books of the century, *Man's Search for Meaning.* Conditions in the camp were appalling: regular torture, starvation and execution. There was no hope of escape or rescue. Around the camp was a highly charged electrical fence. A prisoner who decided to end it all simply needed to throw himself into the fence, which many did. Viktor Frankl noticed in that hellish setting that prisoners who were devout Christians or pious Jews seemed more likely to survive—because they never gave in to hopelessness. He also noted that prisoners who lost hope died shortly thereafter. (See Stephen Ferris, "Preaching Advent Hope at the Beginning of the Millenium, *Journal for Preachers, Advent*, 1999, p.3)

Urban sociologists know that when there is no hope, people become violent, uncaring. Life becomes cheap because it is meaningless. The normal civilities which are the adhesive of life in community—politeness, compassion, consideration—seem to disappear when there is no hope.

Physicians and ministers are familiar with the life giving power of hope, the amazing resiliency of the human spirit when it is empowered by a sense of the future.

Hope and Christmas are almost synonymous. Many of the cards you and I will receive in the next three weeks will invoke hope as the essence of the season. And yet, hope is so easily trivialized and domesticated and transformed into a kind of pollyannaish optimism.

In fact, hope is a powerful theological motif. Theologian Jürgen Moltmann wrote, "From first to last, Christianity is hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionary and transforming the present."

Hope, Moltmann argued, is the primary characteristic of Christian faith, and furthermore, that it is Christian hope that motivates Christians to struggle and work for a better world. He wrote: "That is why faith, wherever it develops into hope, causes not rest but unrest, not patience but impatience . . . Those who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is . . .Peace with God means conflict with the world." That dynamic, Moltmann argues, will make the Christian Church "a constant disturbance in human society." (*Theology of Hope,* p. 21)

In the 6th century B.C., the people of God were in what could be described as a hopeless situation. Their nation had suffered a horrendous military defeat: their beautiful city of Jerusalem had been leveled, their beloved Temple destroyed and they, themselves, had been driven all the way to Babylon where they lived in exile. They were weak, powerless, with no resources to resist, no energy to go on living and believing, and certainly no reason to hope that things were ever going to be different. And it is to them that a prophet addressed some of the most beautiful and hopeful words ever written.

> "Comfort, comfort my people,
> says your God.
> Speak tenderly to Jerusalem . . .
> prepare the way of the Lord,
> make straight in the desert a
> highway for our God.

. . .those who wait for the Lord
shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with
wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint." (Isaiah 40)

That hopeful anticipation was the power to keep a people alive who had no earthly reason to go on living-—an amazing dynamic that is the reason those same people have survived down through the centuries, survived centuries of anti-Semitism, persecution, exile, homelessness, hatred and ultimately a determined effort to eliminate them altogether. The power of hope . . . it is not a pollyannaish optimism.

The late Joseph Sittler wrote a wonderful essay on hope under the title, "I Still Plant Trees." After he retired, Sittler could be seen on the campus of the University of Chicago with a spade and a seedling in his arm, looking for a good place to plant. He was a great theologian, an elegant thinker. He was not pietistic. He wrote that Christian hope is in God, not human history. "I do not think we are in a very good situation historically," he wrote. "Our record indicates that we can walk with our eyes wide open straight into sheer destruction if there is a profit on the way . . ." I have no great expectations that human cussedness will somehow be quickly modified and turned into generosity or that humanity's care of the earth will improve much. But I still go around campus planting trees." (*Grace Notes and Other Fragments,* p.97)

It's not simple optimism. Biblical hope looks reality in the face and refuses to give up. Biblical hope knows that no matter what reality looks like, God is in charge: a God of mercy and justice and love. Biblical hope knows that even in the face of the most hopeless reality—a concentration camp—a terminal illness—nothing can separate us from God's love in Jesus Christ.

That's what Viktor Frankl discovered in the concentration camp. It's what physicians observe at the bedside of critically ill people. There is an almost miraculous resiliency produced by hope. And we know it and see it and experience it in those human situations where hope seems most remote, most unreal, situations where we experience our own powerlessness and hopelessness.

Hopes lives in tension with reality no matter how difficult and challenging and dark the reality may be.

If you are at a dead end, that's exactly where hope emerges.

If you are living in some kind of darkness, expect hope to show up.

If you face what seem to be insurmountable challenges—in your work, in your relationships, in your hopes and dreams, that's exactly when hope goes to work.

If you are tempted simply to give in, to give up, to expect no more than what is, that's exactly where you can expect Advent to feel like an irritant, a prod, a push—because that is exactly what Advent is about.

If you find you can't believe the way you used to believe, if your spirit is lost somewhere in a land of deep darkness—that's exactly where hope comes.

I love Emily Dickinson's description of hope. She was a 19th century poet, mystic, and she created a whimsical and memorable image:

> "Hope is the thing with feathers,
> That perches in the soul,
> And sings the tune without words
> And never stops at all." (Part I, "Life," XXVII, Stanza 1)

Prophet and poet know that hope lives deep in the human spirit; that our capacity to hope is what makes us human.

Philosopher and theologian know that hope is the source of human restlessness and impatience, that hope transforms the present by making us dissatisfied, unwilling to make peace with the way things are. It is precisely because we hope that we are unwilling to give in to the dead inertia of reality.

"Hope has two daughters," Augustine said. "Anger and Courage. Anger at the way things are, and courage to make things other than they are."

I've been debating all week whether or not to tell a story of hope this morning because it is not an easy story to tell. It is a story of human tragedy, human sin, and human hope. I decided to tell the story when a large bouquet of artificial bright red roses arrived in my office. They have become my personal symbol of Christmas hope this year.

It's a story of one of our youngsters, let's call him Melvin, who lives with his mother and grandmother and younger brother in Cabrini Green. Melvin was in the tutoring program as a young child, his younger brother is in our tutoring program now, he knew his brother's tutor, had visited in his home, even swam in his pool. Melvin was targeted by a gang and did what he thought he had to do to protect himself—got a gun—a very simple thing to do. He had no police record. When gang members came after him, Melvin pulled out his gun, shot it, hit and killed a young girl who was standing nearby, a life long friend of his, with whom he had gone to kindergarten, 15 years old. He was arrested, tried, convicted of 1st degree murder, sentenced to life in prison. Melvin was 16 at the time. He is 17 now. His situation is about as hopeless as it gets. His mother and grandmother, however, are people of faith who don't easily accommodate to the reality of hopelessness. After his conviction, they were devastated, helpless, reached out to the only person they could think of—the tutor, a member of this church. It seems there is reason for a reconsideration of the conviction and sentence. An appeal costs several thousand dollars. His mother and grandmother scraped together all they had and borrowed against a small life insurance policy and fell several thousand dollars short.

Could we help? Should we help? A terrible thing has happened, a young woman is dead, and now a young man's life is over as well. We could and we did. You could and you did. In the name of Jesus Christ, in the name of the hope that is within us, we did.

And so the bouquet arrived with two notes, one from Melvin's mother, one from his grandmother. His grandmother wrote:

> "As I sit here and write this letter, words cannot express the way I feel about the generous contribution your church made for Melvin's appeal. I come from a poor family. Me and my daughter did not know how we were going to get the money. When I came from court I sat down and asked God to show me the way and Sandy (the tutor) came to mind. I remembered how nice he was to Melvin.
>
> Pastor Buchanan, Melvin is not a bad kid. He just got caught up like so many black boys . . . He never complained about anything, always held his head up so me and his mother would not have to worry about him. I want to thank you and the church again for what you have done for my grandson. God bless you."

> "Hope has two daughters.
> Anger and courage
> Anger at the way things are,
> Courage to make things other
> than the way they are."

The source of our hope is the event Advent waits for. The quiet coming of God into human history; the gentle appearance of light in the darkness, the birth of a child in the night, weak, helpless, vulnerable—the very incarnation of God, the irresistible power of love, the promise of hope.

When the notes and the bouquet of artificial roses arrived this week, I had already chosen the hymn to follow this sermon on hope. The bulletin was at the printers. I've been pondered the coincidence all week.

"Lo, how a rose e'er blooming
Amid the cold of winter
when half spent was the night.

Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE
John Wilkinson December 5, 1999

Let us pray. Gracious God, you have come to us as wisdom, pervading and permeating all of creation. You have come to us as power, appearing as a burning bush, rising as a sign for all of the people. You have come to us as compassion, as warm light and lightly falling rain. You have come to us as hope, as possibility, as an open door, as a new way, as a journey which destination is love and justice and reconciliation. And so this day we shall endeavor to greet your hope with our hope, to respond to your graciousness with our gratitude, to live in love's promise because you are ever faithful to your promise to redeem, to save, to make whole and new and alive.

And so when hope's promise seems tattered or shadowed by the sins of the world, make it strong in us. When disease ravages our friends and loved ones, give them a full measure of your presence, and give them Christ's presence in our hearts and hands and voices. When hopelessness faces people in our communities -- because of addiction or loneliness or poverty or job loss or a broken relationship -- give them a full measure of your loving kindness.

When politics and economics and emotions lead to human conflict -- in places like Cabrini-Green or Louisville or Seattle or Chechnya -- deliver a full measure of your justice and righteousness. When we view glimpses of your radiant dawn, as we have seen this week in Northern Ireland, give us a full measure of the capacity to celebrate, because by so doing we proclaim to the world that hope is alive.

And so in this season of anticipation and expectation, gracious God, as we wait for a new heaven and a new earth, may we greet your promise with joy, and to be ready in that half-spent night, to sing the song, to tend to the flower, to show your love aright.

O come, Lord God, and order all things with strength and gentleness. Come quickly to teach and to deliver, to shine and to form, to set free and to save. In the name of the one who is God with us, even Christ Jesus. Amen.